

SKELETONS OF COPAN



Dr. Katherine Miller Wolf

By Jeremy Morrison

Dr. Katherine Miller Wolf can learn a lot about a person after they're dead. The University of West Florida bioarchaeologist studies skeletons.

"You can put on different clothes, decorate your house in different ways, have different objects around you where you're trying to portray a particular identity or something like that," Miller Wolf explained recently, "but in a lot of ways, your skeleton tells the story of who you are in a way that you can't change and you can't lie about, you can't alter. I'm going to be able to tell if you broke your arm. I'm going to be able to tell if you're healthy or sick. I'm going to be able to tell where you're from."

Miller Wolf has received a U.S. Fulbright Scholar grant, which will allow her to spend the second half of this year teaching students from the National Autonomous University of Honduras at the Mayan archaeological site of Copan.

"We're going to talk about conservation methods; we're going to talk about skeletal analysis, how to excavate things and really kind of give them a good plan for working with skeletal remains and working with conservation plans moving forward," the bioarchaeologist said.

Copan is familiar territory for Miller Wolf. For years, she helped to excavate and conserve the most extensive collection of skeletal remains in Mesoamerica. Returning to the Mayan site and working with

students in Honduras is something she's long wanted to do and a mission she hopes will be beneficial for the future of biological anthropology in the country.

"The whole thing," Miller Wolf said, "it's like a dream."

A STORY TOLD BY BONES

Copan is one of a handful of major Mayan archaeological sites. It's estimated the site was home to between 40,000 and 60,000 people, reaching its peak population between 600 and 800 A.D.

"This was a really big urban center," Miller Wolf said. "They had kings there; they had queens there; they had a large economy; they were trading jade; they controlled huge swaths of territory."

Copan is rich in sculptures and also glyphs, home to a hieroglyphic stairway that documents the dynastic history of the site and serves as the longest written text in Mesoamerica. The site has also proven rich in skeletal remains.

Miller Wolf first visited Copan as a student at Arizona State University in 2004. It was then that she began a years-long task of conserving a collection of more than 1,200 human skeletal remains wasting away in boxes and bags inside an archaeological storage facility.

"It was just a mess," Miller Wolf recalled. "The collection really hadn't been taken care of very well. And it's a tropical environment, so you have a lot of issues that can exacerbate things with pests and insects and humidity. It all wreaks havoc on a collection."

Archaeologists have been studying Copan since the late 1800s. These remains that Miller Wolf was working with had been stored for 30 to 100 years. Using funds from the National Science Foundation, she cleaned a nd properly packed the collection away.

There's a lot that can be learned about a civilization and culture through studying the skeletal remains left behind. They provide a glimpse of what life was like—both biologically and culturally—in Copan so long ago.

"That can give us access to understanding what life was like for the average person, which is my primary purpose," Miller Wolf said. "I've excavated a few royal tombs here and there, but I'm mostly interested in what families were doing, how people were living and what their diet was like. And were they healthy? Were they sick? You know, how long did people live?"

Turns out, ancient Mayans were a lot like people of any given period and place. "Essentially, it's all the same, everybody was trying to do the same things: take care of their kids, put dinner on the table, go to work, harvest their crops. It was all very basic," Miller Wolf said.

One of the interesting things the bioarchaeologist has learned through studying skeletal remains from Copan is about the population's migration habits. By studying isotopes found in teeth, which reveal where a person is from, she has learned that about 40% of people living at the site arrived there from elsewhere in the Mayan world.

"So, we're able to understand migration from, like, 800 A.D., and it turns out that people were moving," Miller Wolf said, comparing the Mayan's of antiquity with people of today. "Really what we're looking at is migration is a very, very, very normal part of the human experience, the same way that we see it today. Everybody's moving around. I mean, I just moved to Pensacola. You know, we're always moving from point A to point B, and it's a very common part of living as a person."

Here's something else that's interesting—Immigrants to Copan were found buried with dishes made locally, while native residents were buried with dishes imported from afar.

"So you have two things going on there. You have one where people are trying to kind of take on the identity it seems of where they are living and dying, and then you have others who are from that area who are getting these objects because they're sort of a prestige object because they're from far away," Miller Wolf said. "That's why I love studying this stuff. Because the ancient Mayans, even though it was 800 A.D., were doing the exact same things that we're doing today. I mean, it's kind of funny almost. I think people have always been doing the same sort of funny things that humans have done for thousands of years now."

COPAN, FOREVER

Five years ago, Miller Wolf returned to Honduras and taught an intensive summer course on physical anthropology at NAUH. Since then, former students have urged her to return. The Fulbright grant will allow her to do so.

"They just don't have anybody that teaches biological anthropology there, and so I feel an obligation given that Honduras has given me so much just by virtue of letting me come there and do all of these things for all this time, it's my duty now to go and teach and share everything that I know," Miller Wolf said.

In January, the UWF assistant professor of anthropology was awarded the 2020 Archaeological Institute of America Conservation and Heritage Management Award for her work in Copan over the years. Expressing a strong connection with the area and calling her work there "probably a lifetime commitment," Miller Wolf said she hopes to continue returning to Honduras well after this May-through-December stretch funded through her Fulbright grant.

"My hope is that I'm going to keep going back for the next—forever, until I die," she said. "And my former students are going to be the ones running these big projects, these conservation projects, and studying the skeletons all over the country." *[in]*

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